

Many minds make might work: mass collaboration, open source, and global change

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Abstract

Mass collaboration and open source can be very effectively applied in the social innovation and social entrepreneurship space. Emerging applications are described, useful as tools or models for the social entrepreneur.

History: Generating content collectively

Generating substantive content collectively is nothing new — witness the thousands of contributors to the **Oxford English Dictionary project** in the late nineteenth century, which produced one of the intellectual edifices of the 20th century, unparalleled in any other language. The **Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential** (www.uia.org/encyclopedia/volall.php), begun in 1972, was originally print-based (3 vols, ca. 3000 pages), and derived its content not from individuals, but from the documents of organizations worldwide. Even before the World Wide Web came on the scene, thousands of people were typing in public domain texts which formed the corpus of Project Gutenberg.

The Web has accelerated the process of peer production, heralded by the success of **large-scale open source software projects** like Linux, OpenOffice, Gimp, Inkscape, Apache, MySQL, and MediaWiki, and fueled by industry participation, with IBM notably paying scores of developers to work on open source software initiatives. There are now thousands of open source projects hosted at content repositories like SourceForge.net.

Individual **distributed computing** projects (SETI@Home, Folding@Home, XGrid@Stanford) are now giving way to open standards which allow anyone, regardless of computing platform, to donate computer time to large computing tasks of a humanitarian nature (World Community Grid).

The success of open source computing, and Richard Stallman's GPL (GNU Public License), which gave open source software the legal framework it needed, prompted a move to found a similar license for human-readable content, giving birth to free culture and the **Creative Commons** (see <http://support.creativecommons.org/videos#gc>).

Grounded by this license, and spurred by the new technologies that the Web (and now, Web 2.0 -- see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yv-UXJzInCk>) make available, we are beginning to see large-scale collaboration on freely available content. Instead of being distributed over many computers, the work is **distributed over many minds**. Instead of writing computer programs, people are now generating knowledge. The Wikipedia project is probably the premier, but by no means the only, example of successful distributed knowledge production.

We are already seeing the emergence of **peer production in the physical realm**. In China, small shops are cooperating in assembling motorcycles with interchangeable subsystems in a distributed fashion (Tapscott et al.). Such practices could scale to build the first open source cars. Open source CAD is already being used to make blueprints for future vehicles, based around a philosophy of interchangeability and minimal parts at www.theoscarproject.org/ (OSCar) and sustainability at www.osgv.org/ (The Open Source Green Vehicle Project). In tandem, peer production and Open Source CAD offer the potential to introduce sustainable transportation technologies into the marketplace at low cost.

Other initiatives, such as **ThinkCycle** (www.thinkcycle.org), or www.openarchitecturenetwork.org, aim at collectively solving “design challenges facing underserved communities and the environment,” (ThinkCycle) and open sourcing these designs.

Once clever solutions to long standing problems exist as open source blueprints (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_design), they can be built as needed in underdeveloped areas through the use of inexpensive 3D printing (reprap.org), or **Fab Labs** (small scale workshops that can be used to build one of virtually anything) (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fab_lab).

Workaday practices for the global practitioner

- Mine the **data sources** (national and UN statistics, gapminder.org).
- Become proficient in the tools for **social networking** (facebook.com, LinkedIn.com, <http://del.icio.us/>, myspace.com, citeulike.org).
- Attend **meetups** in your city related to what you do (meetups.com).
- Learn how to produce content for the emerging social media (blogs, podcasts, Flickr, YouTube). Contribute your voice to <http://librivox.org/>
- Participate in the **blogosphere**, learn how to monetize what you do (<http://www.stevepavlina.com/blog/2006/05/how-to-make-money-from-your-blog/>). Join (or start!) a **group blog** around your topic.
- Learn how to write like the pros (read *Clear and Simple as the Truth*, *On Writing Well*, and *A Writer's Time*).
- Become involved in **citizen journalism** ([indymedia](http://indymedia.org), www.globalvoicesonline.org/), or **distributed journalism** (zero.newassignment.net/about). Create courseware for cnx.org.
- Find **existing communities of interest** and bring them together
- Empower communities by **bundling** relevant open source software.
- Seed ideas: whynot.net, halfbakery.com, globalideasbank.org, listible.com
- Get comfortable **editing the Wikipedia** (www.wikipedia.com).
- Make a wiki (<http://pbwiki.com/>). Start your own **Wikia** (www.wikia.com).
- Explore **systems of deliberation** (openpolitics.ca) or start your own.
- Hold **global, multiple-time-zone meetings** and conference calls using Skype, freeconferencecall.com, the worldclock.org meeting planner (www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/meeting.html), and Google Calendar.
- Become hip to the world of **Make magazine** (www.makezine.com/)
- Find (or found!) a **free media lab** (www.mongrelx.org/?q=gyoml)
- Help bring laptops to the world's children (laptop.media.mit.edu/)
- Sponsor a **FabLab** (fab.cba.mit.edu/) in an under-served location.

References

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- **music**: lay down some grooves on cc:mixer; organize a global synchronized listening party, start a record label
- **art**: share work on www.deviantart.com/ or www.flickr.com/. Curate an art show of artists from around the world. Bonus: do it in Second Life.
- **finance**: explore the world of **peer to peer microcredit** (www.kiva.org) and currency democracy (www.ripplepay.com, www.letslinkuk.net/practice/theory.htm) as a way to understand paradigm shifting technologies.
- **community**: start a free wireless hotspot that informs people about their neighbourhood: <http://www.ilesansfil.org/tiki-index.php?page=Projets>
- **science and technology**: replicate innocentive.com in your area
- **government or politics**: www.mysociety.org/projects, www.howdtheyvote.ca/, or openpolicy.ca.
- **taking action**: Look at savetheinternet.com, avaaz.org and changemakers.net for very successful and credible models of how it can be done.

Advanced practices for the global practitioner

- Identify the **disruptive applications of the future**. Build them, or have them built. Open source them. Watch the world alter.
- Inspire the opening up of **closed information silos** in your area, at national and international levels. Get the facts, and allow everyone else to get them too. Build databases, or get the data into existing publicly available databases. Make sure that policymakers and citizens alike are dealing with the real data.
- Identify the as yet undiscovered win-win-win practices in your sector and the infrastructure necessary to make them possible. Design systems of effective **deliberation, coordination, and workability** for everyone in your domain of interest.
- Work out the principles of having **Difficult Conversations** about what you care about at a societal level (<http://www.pon.harvard.edu/hnp/>). Have them.
- Discover a **generative class of human knowledge** that has never been aggregated. Aggregate it. Generate it.
- Design communities of practice that don't yet exist. Figure out the tools necessary to empower those practices. Make them.
- **Seed a field** by writing a paper succinctly laying out the issues for a brand new area of inquiry (ala Robert Trivers). Watch the world flesh it out.
- Given a paradigm that isn't possible with the current infrastructure, **figure out what infrastructure would make it possible**, and cause it to come into existence.
- Familiarize yourself with Donella Meadows' **Twelve Leverage Points to Intervene in a System** (http://www.sustainabilityinstitute.org/pubs/Leverage_Points.pdf). Apply leverage. Transcend a paradigm. Extra credit: find an additional point of leverage.